FREE GUIDE · WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

From Coach Mike Lipsey · Iron Freak Fitness

NATURAL CEILING GUIDE

How big can you get without drugs? Nobody knows your exact limit, but the research gives honest ranges.

01 THE FFMI "CUTOFF" (AND ITS LIMITS)

Fat-free mass index (FFMI) is lean mass scaled to height, like BMI for muscle. In a 1995 study of 157 male athletes, non-users topped out around 25. Many steroid users were well above it.

Kouri, Pope, Katz & Oliva 1995, Clin J Sport Med 5(4):223-228

WHY 25 IS A RED FLAG, NOT A RULE

- One small, men-only study of 74 non-users.
- It describes a group, not your genetics. Rare people sit above 25 naturally.
- In 235 college football players, about 26% were above 25. Drug use was not reported.

02 GENETICS: THE BIGGEST VARIABLE

In 585 people on the same 12-week arm-training program, muscle size change ranged from about -2% to +59%. Same plan, wildly different results.

Hubal et al. 2005, Med Sci Sports Exerc 37(6):964-972 · Trexler et al. 2017, J Strength Cond Res 31(10):2719-2727

Education only. Not medical advice. Talk to your doctor.

03 HOW FAST CAN YOU GAIN?

No study gives a precise rate by training age, but gains slow as you get more trained. A coach's rule of thumb (opinion, not a guarantee):

YEAR 1	Fastest gains, often a few kg of lean mass.
YEARS 2-3	Roughly half the rate of year one.
YEARS 4+	Slow. Small gains measured in years.

ACSM position stand 2009, Med Sci Sports Exerc 41(3):687-708 · Rates are coaching heuristics, not peer-reviewed.

04 WHY ENHANCED PHYSIQUES MISLEAD

- In a controlled trial, men on high-dose testosterone who did not train still gained more muscle and strength than men on placebo. Testosterone plus training gained the most.
- Photos aren't data. Lighting, pump, posing, filters and editing change how a physique looks.

Bhasin et al. 1996, N Engl J Med 335(1):1-7

05 "IS HE NATTY?" THINK, DON'T ACCUSE

You can't diagnose anyone from a photo. Some patterns make a natural claim statistically less likely, not impossible:

- Estimated FFMI well above 25 while very lean.
- Large gains in a very short time.
- Staying stage-lean and full year-round.

Use these to set your expectations, not to judge others.

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06 FFMI CALCULATOR: WORKED EXAMPLE

STEP 1	Height 70 in × 0.0254 = 1.778 m. Weight 180 lb ÷ 2.2046 = 81.6 kg.
STEP 2	Lean mass = 81.6 × (1 - 0.15 body fat) = 69.4 kg.
STEP 3	FFMI = 69.4 ÷ 1.778^2 = 22.0.
STEP 4	Normalized FFMI = FFMI + 6.3 × (1.8 - 1.778) = 22.1. Within the natural range.

Body-fat estimates can be off by several points, which moves FFMI a lot. Treat the result as a ballpark.

07 HOW TO GET CLOSE TO YOUR CEILING

- **Progressive overload:** add reps, load or sets over time, with multi-joint lifts.
- **Protein about 1.6 g/kg/day:** extra benefit leveled off around there in a meta-analysis.
- **Sleep 7+ hours:** adults need at least 7. One night of no sleep cut muscle protein synthesis by about 18% in a small lab study.
- **Consistency:** years of good training beat any perfect 12-week plan.

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Sources: ACSM 2009 · Morton 2018, Br J Sports Med 52:376 · Watson 2015, Sleep 38:843 · Lamon 2021, Physiol Rep 9:e14660 · plus the studies cited on pages 1 and 2.

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